

5. Cyrus and the Newport Clissetts

The family of Philip Clissett's elder brother, Cyrus, formed a distinct group of chairmakers that operated initially across the Worcestershire-Herefordshire border close to Philip himself. Eventually, though, the entire chairmaking family migrated to South Wales where they continued the business, though not necessarily the traditions. Some family members became involved in other aspects of the furniture trade. Careers, as far as they are known, are set out in Appendix 3. Family relationships for those appearing in Appendix 3 are set out in Figure 5.1.

Cyrus Clissett spent most of his earlier working life in Castlemorton, Birtsmorton or Berrow, parishes immediately adjacent to one another. Before 1841, he was recorded as a turner,^{1,2} and thereafter as a chairmaker.^{3,4,5,6} Until about 1842, he was working very close to his father and brother, but we have no evidence of them working together. Cyrus married Sarah Knight in 1828, and they produced four daughters and three sons. For a brief period during this time, sometime between 1844 and 1849, he relocated to Wyche in Colwall, Herefordshire, where his wife died in the summer of 1849 of suspected typhus. In Colwall, he was recorded as a basketmaker in September 1849 (so many records exist of Cyrus Clissett's occupation as a chairmaker, that this single instance may well be one of the many errors found in parish records).

This was a difficult time for Cyrus. In 1850, he found himself accused of theft:

AN IMPUDENT THIEF — Cyrus Clissett is a chair maker, and his home is situate at Colwall, Herefordshire. He is well known in the neighbourhood of this town from the fact of frequently offering chairs of his own manufacture for sale here. On Wednesday week he had an arm chair for sale, and succeeded in obtaining a customer for it in the person of one John Morris, of Castlemorton. After Morris had made his purchase he found it was not then convenient to take it home, and a friend of his allowed him to leave it at his house, but on the following morning, upon calling for it, it was absent. A search was made, and it was traced to the possession of a shopkeeper in Upton, to whom Clissett had sold it again for 4s. The only possible way in which he could have repossessed himself of the chair is that he must have watched for the absence of the inmates of the house where Morris had left it, and then helped himself, as he was seen near the house about four o'clock on the morning it was missing. Police-officer Probert waited upon the prisoner on Friday last at his residence, and conveyed him before E.G. Stone, Esq., the following day, who committed him for trial at the Sessions.⁷

As a result, On Wednesday 3 July 1850, Cyrus was brought before Sir J. Pakington, Bart., M.P. on 3rd July charged with having stolen a chair valued at three shillings.⁸ He was undefended, found guilty, and sentenced to three month's imprisonment with hard labour.^{9,10,11}

By 1851, Cyrus was out of prison and back in Castlemorton. Both his son, Cyrus aged about 21, and his daughter Mary, aged about 16, were working with him as chair makers.¹² Mary died two years later in Bosbury while living at Briarcroft.¹³ This was the same address as William Cole, Philip's brother-in-law, and is the only evidence of possible communication between Cyrus and his younger brother.

Before long, Cyrus found himself in trouble again:

FELONY.— A man named Cyrus Clissett, living at Castlemorton, was last week committed for trial at the Adjourned Sessions, by Colonel Bond, charged with having, by means of false pretences, fraudulently obtained a chair from Mr.

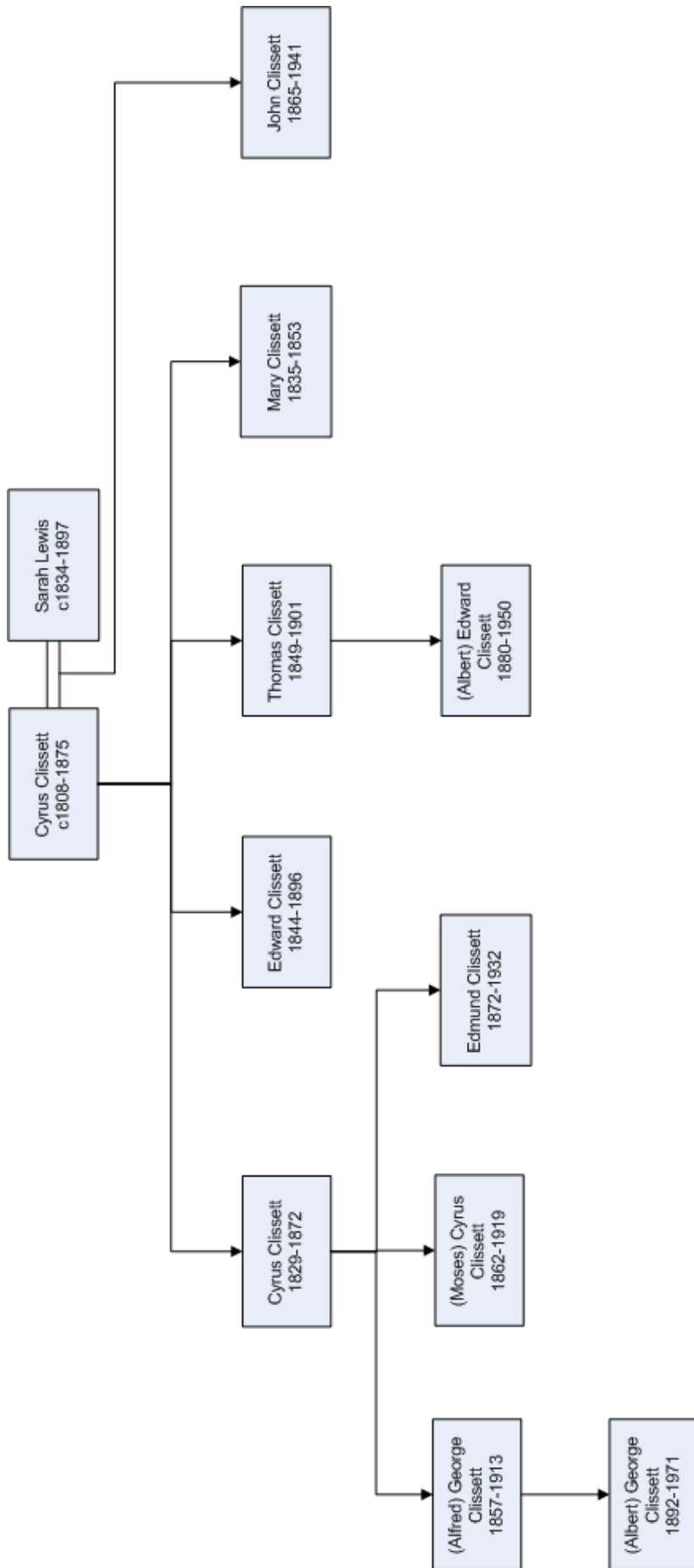


Figure 5.1: Cyrus Clissett's family: relationships between chair makers and others involved in furniture trades (see Appendix 3 for details of individual careers). All other family members are excluded from this diagram.

Bellers, of Newland, and subsequently sold it for 5s. The prisoner had been previously convicted of a like offence.¹⁴

Although this case came to court in February 1852, the indictment referred to incidents on 16th October 1850, immediately after Cyrus would have been released from Worcester Gaol. The indictment was long and complicated and, again, involved the selling, re-appropriation and reselling of a chair (an armchair, according to the court records), with a subsequent accusation of theft. The Grand Jury “Ignored the Bill of Indictment”, and Cyrus was discharged.¹⁵

By 1861, Cyrus had left the Malvern area, and was living in Milvern Lane, Bromyard, Herefordshire, 20 miles from his home village.¹⁶ He continued his trade with his youngest son Thomas working beside him. He was living next door to Sarah Lewis, a 29-year old leather glove maker. Despite the twenty-five years difference in their ages, they married in Bromyard in 1864.¹⁷

Sometime between 1861 and 1865, Cyrus moved to Newport, Monmouthshire.¹⁸ His move was part of a family exodus, with his three sons moving there as well. In Newport, Cyrus set up a new workshop, with Sarah helping him.¹⁹ His directory listing as a chairmaker in 1871²⁰ suggests he may have been working on his own account, but this is far from certain. Amidst the industry and machinery of the fast-growing town, he continued to work in the way he new best, with the pole lathe. After his death in 1875, Sarah advertised for help:

Wanted, a steady man for turning chair work with pole lathe. Regular work. —
Apply to S. Clissett, 2, West Market-street, Newport, Mon.²¹

Sarah continued to work in the furniture trade, firstly by trying to keep the chairmaking business going,²² then later as a french polisher with her son John.²³ John stayed in the furniture business variously as a polisher,^{24,25} chair repairer, and cabinet maker^{26,27,28,29,30,31} between 1891 and 1914. One record of his occupation comes from a macabre story headlined as “A Newport Poisoning Case” (he married Fanny Cordelia Greenwood early in 1890):

A married woman named Fanny Clissett, living with her husband in East Market-street, Newport, has been admitted to the Newport Infirmary suffering severely from poison, supposed to have been self-administered late on Saturday night. She was in an unconscious condition. It was not ascertained what character poison she had taken, but with the administration of the stomach pump a good deal of relief was afforded, and she is now progressing favourably. It is stated that the woman had attempted suicide twice before. Mrs. Clissett, who is about 24 years of age, has only been married about three months. She came from London, and, since her marriage, has occasionally assisted her husband in his trade as a repairer of chairs.³²

The younger Cyrus and his family

Cyrus’s eldest son, another Cyrus, after working with his father in Castlemorton around 1851,³³ started up a workshop on Widemarsh Common in the city of Hereford; he was there by 1861, working with his younger brother, Edward, and an apprentice.³⁴ He seems to have moved away from Hereford quite soon after, as his next child was born in Blockley, Gloucestershire,³⁵ and registered locally in 1862³⁶ (but baptised in Newport in 1864³⁷). Then, between 1865 and 1872, the younger Cyrus registered the birth of three further children in the Newport and Cardiff area, which suggests he was living there.^{38,39,40} By 1871, he was employed as a cabinet maker in Derby.⁴¹ The following year, he died in South Wales.⁴²

After his death, his wife Ann, a Birtsmorton girl, married a chairmaker from London, Alfred Charles Dixcey^{43,44} (occasionally spelt “Dixey”). Alfred and his father George came from High Wycombe, but George was based as a chairmaker in Lambeth from before 1941.⁴⁵ Theirs must have been a successful business as, in 1851 the household included two servants; in 1861, two apprentice chair makers and a polisher; and in 1871, one apprentice and a boy to tend the pony. In 1881, George was employing four men and two girls and, at this point, Alfred had just moved to Newport having married Ann Clissett in London.⁴⁶ Although Alfred had always worked in his father’s chairmaking business, he appears to have worked as a cabinet maker in Newport.

The younger Cyrus had three sons, all of whom were involved in the furniture trade. The youngest, Edmund, made his living as a french polisher.⁴⁷ The eldest, Albert George (known as George), worked as a chairmaker; always, as far is known, as an employee.⁴⁸ The earliest record of his profession is in 1891 in Newport. He appears to have lived in Birmingham for several years during the 1890s, though the nature of his work there isn’t known. His census return for 1901 shows him making Windsor chairs in Bristol. By 1911, he was employed in Cardiff, again on Windsor chairs. The middle son, Moses Cyrus, seems to have been employed variously as a cabinet maker^{49,50} or frame maker.⁵¹ He married Ethel Finemore, a french polisher,⁵² in 1898.⁵³ He seems to have variously worked for himself and for others and, by 1900, was dealing in furniture to the extent of having various premises in the centre of Newport, with disastrous consequences:

The shop and workshop of Mr Clissett, furniture dealer, 68, High-street, Newport, were gutted by fire on Saturday evening. So great was the conflagration that the top of High-street was blocked with spectators, and traffic in the busiest part of the night was stopped by the occurrence. It is not certain how the fire originated. Mr and Mrs Clissett, who carry on the business between them, and a workman named Hansey stated that they left the place apparently all right about 9.45, and in about half an hour the fire was raging. The damage, unfortunately not covered by insurance, is roughly estimated at about £250.⁵⁴

Although listings for the furniture dealership at various addresses in Newport can be found up until 1907,^{55,56} by 1911 Moses Cyrus Clissett was, like so many of his family, working for someone else as a chairmaker.⁵⁷

Edward and Thomas Clissett

The elder Cyrus had a further two sons who were also involved in chairmaking. Edward was working with his brother, the younger Cyrus, at the Hereford workshop in 1861,⁵⁸ and appears to have been the first member of the family to head for Newport; he married Harriet Nott there in 1863.⁵⁹ By 1871 he was sharing his home in Albert Street (just round the corner from his father) with his younger brother, Thomas.⁶⁰ Both were making chairs, apparently on the premises with their wives as helpers. Chairmaking was the life-long profession of both these men. Both, in common with all other chairmakers in Newport at the time, were recorded as employees in 1891.⁶¹ Thomas’s appearance in trade directories from 1875,⁶² 1880⁶³ and 1899⁶⁴ suggests that either his employment status varied, or that he was soliciting private work alongside his employment. In 1901, however, he gave his occupation as “Windsor Chair Maker”, and it is clear that he was then working at home on his own account.⁶⁵

Thomas Clissett’s son, Albert Edward, was working as his father’s employee in 1901,⁶⁶ and carried on the business of chairmaking in Newport after his father’s death until 1914 and possibly longer, as E. Clissett & Son (he was known by his middle name, Edward).^{67,68,69} There is some evidence of his employing staff, and Edward may well have been the last of the Clissett chairmakers in South Wales.

The wholesale migration of the elder Cyrus's chairmaking family from Herefordshire to Newport was probably prompted by the promise of "regular work" (to quote Sarah Clissett's advertisement) in the vibrant and rapidly expanding town. It is no doubt significant that their accommodation in Newport, in West Market Street and Albert Street, was located within yards of other chairmaking families based in Dolphin Street. William Green, a chairmaker and polisher, lived at No 1 with his family (Edward Clissett's family was to live at No 1 in later years) and Alice Hawkins, a chairmaker's wife.⁷⁰ Her son, George Hawkins, lived at No 15 with his family. Alice's husband was William Hawkins, a chairmaker based at the "Leather Bottle", Wendover throughout the 1840s,^{71,72} and still there in 1854⁷³ (by 1851 his role as publican seems to have become more important than chairmaking⁷⁴). All hailed from Buckinghamshire (with birthplaces recorded as West Wycombe, Windsor and Marsh. This link between the Newport Clissetts and Thames Valley chairmakers may account for Alice Clissett's marriage to Alfred Dixey, who had his roots in High Wycombe (see above).

Rather sketchily, in this account of a branch of Philip Clissett's family, we can see gradual changes as a family working in a traditional rural craft gets to grips with life in an industrial town. Some of their working methods may have survived the move, at least initially, as suggested by the use of the pole lathe by the elder Cyrus. It seems doubtful whether their chair style survived the move, though, and many of the later family members appear to have been making Windsor chairs. The old independence of self-employment seems to have been gradually lost; the 1891 census shows nine chairmakers operating in Newport within a short distance of one another, all of them employees. On the other hand, three or four independent Clissett furniture businesses developed subsequently, including chairmaking, polishing, and general furniture dealing. Cyrus and his family, in finding an alternative way to survive within their trade, were perhaps more enterprising than Philip who sat tight in Bosbury. Cyrus made his family's luck, while Philip's came right to his door in the form of James MacLaren, followed shortly by Ernest Gimson and a tide of Arts & Crafts devotees.

References

- ¹ Castlemorton PR: Baptisms, 15 Feb 1829, 25 May 1835, 3 Jul 1836.
- ² Birtsmorton PR: Baptisms, 11 Feb 1838.
- ³ Census: 1841, 1851.
- ⁴ Berrow PR: Baptisms, 25 Dec 1842.
- ⁵ Castlemorton PR: Baptisms, 27 Oct 1844.
- ⁶ Death certificate: Sarah Clissett, Aug 1849.
- ⁷ *Worcester Herald*, 29 June 1850
- ⁸ WRO: 782/219
- ⁹ WRO: Worcester Quarter Sessions, Midsummer 1850.
- ¹⁰ *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 3 July 1850.
- ¹¹ *Worcester Herald*, 6 July 1850.
- ¹² Census: 1851.
- ¹³ Bosbury PR: Burials, 25 Jun 1853.
- ¹⁴ *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 19 February 1852.
- ¹⁵ WRO: Worcester Quarter Sessions, Epiphany 1852.
- ¹⁶ Census: 1861.
- ¹⁷ GRO index: Marriages, Jul-Sep 1864.
- ¹⁸ GRO index: Baptisms (John Clissett) Oct-Dec 1865.
- ¹⁹ Census: 1871.
- ²⁰ *Post Office Directory of Monmouthshire, 1871.*
- ²¹ *Western Mail*, November 7 and 9, 1876.
- ²² *John's Directory of Newport, 1880.*
- ²³ Census: 1881.
- ²⁴ *Kelly's Directory of Monmouthshire, 1891.*

- ²⁵ *Cardiff & District Trades Directory, 1899.*
- ²⁶ Census: 1891, 1901.
- ²⁷ *Cardiff & District Trades Directory, 1899.*
- ²⁸ *Kelly's Directory of Monmouthshire, 1901.*
- ²⁹ *John's Street Directory of Newport, Mons., 1901.*
- ³⁰ *South Wales & Monmouthshire Directory, 1907.*
- ³¹ *Kelly's Directory of Monmouthshire, 1914.*
- ³² *Western Mail*, May 20, 1890.
- ³³ Census: 1851.
- ³⁴ Census: 1861.
- ³⁵ Census: 1871.
- ³⁶ GRO index: Births (Moses Cyrus Clissett), Jul-Sep 1862.
- ³⁷ St Paul's, Newport PR: Baptisms, 3 Feb 1864.
- ³⁸ Pilgwenlly, Newport PR: Baptisms, 16 Feb 1865.
- ³⁹ St John's, Canton PR: Baptisms, 7 Dec 1867.
- ⁴⁰ St Mary's Cardiff PR: Baptisms, 6 Dec 1872.
- ⁴¹ Census: 1871.
- ⁴² GRO index: Deaths, Apr-Jun 1872.
- ⁴³ GRO index: Marriages, Oct-Dec 1880.
- ⁴⁴ Census: 1881.
- ⁴⁵ Census: 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871.
- ⁴⁶ Census: 1881.
- ⁴⁷ Census: 1891, 1911.
- ⁴⁸ Census: 1891, 1901, 1911.
- ⁴⁹ Census: 1881.
- ⁵⁰ *Cardiff & District Trades Directory, 1899.*
- ⁵¹ Census: 1891, 1901.
- ⁵² Census: 1901.
- ⁵³ GRO index: Marriages, Apr-Jun 1898.
- ⁵⁴ *Western Mail*, 29 Oct 1900
- ⁵⁵ *John's Street Directory of Newport, Mons., 1901.*
- ⁵⁶ *South Wales & Monmouthshire Directory, 1907.*
- ⁵⁷ Census: 1911.
- ⁵⁸ Census: 1861.
- ⁵⁹ St Paul's, Newport PR: Marriages, 16 Nov 1863.
- ⁶⁰ Census: 1871.
- ⁶¹ Census: 1891.
- ⁶² *Worrall's Directory of South Wales, 1875.*
- ⁶³ *John's Directory of Newport, 1880.*
- ⁶⁴ *Cardiff & District Trades Directory, 1899.*
- ⁶⁵ Census: 1901.
- ⁶⁶ Census: 1901.
- ⁶⁷ *South Wales & Monmouthshire Directory, 1907.*
- ⁶⁸ *Cardiff, Newport & District Trades Directory, 1914.*
- ⁶⁹ *Kelly's Directory of Monmouthshire, 1914.*
- ⁷⁰ Census: 1861.
- ⁷¹ Census: 1841.
- ⁷² B.D. Cotton (1990). *The English Regional Chair*. Antique Collectors Club.
- ⁷³ *Post Office Directory of Berks., Northants., etc, 1854.*
- ⁷⁴ Census: 1851.